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Real Vs. Reel: Identity Fragmentation in the Age of Internet in Lockwood's *No One is Talking About This*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the conflict between real and reel identity in the hyper-digitized era, in the case of *No One Is Talking About This* by Lockwood. The study is based on the Turkle's theory of the formation of online identities, as stated in her book, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (1995). It focuses on how internet culture is dismantling a collective sense of identity and imposing it with fragmented, performative online dependent identities. The structure presented by Turkle uncovers the life of Lockwood's protagonist as it is situated in a surreal world where the construction of identity is guided by online platforms rather than the offline lived reality. The discontinuity of the consciousness created by the mobility of constant connections, immersion in platforms, and communication based on memes is reflected in the discontinuous form of narrative in the novel. Despite the fact that the existing scholarship has delved into the way Lockwood addresses the issue of the internet discourse and the language of social media, there is a need for an analytical work which directly places the text in the context of the theoretical paradigm of identity fragmentation as discussed by Turkle. This study addresses this gap by reconsidering the narrative of Lockwood using the identity model of Turkle to shed light on the heightened crisis of fragmentation amid digital culture and opens avenues for future researchers to analyse the chaos and absurdity associated with social media through fictional representations.

Keywords: Digital Identity, Fragmentation, Online Self, Platform Culture, Narrative Discontinuity, Hyper-Digitized Era

Introduction

No One Is Talking About This (2021) by Patricia Lockwood is an insightful approach to the subject of contradicting virtual and real selves in the era of the internet. The novel describes an un-named main character, who is divided between the real world, which is offline and the portal, which is dance performance and internet-based. Her identity is further disintegrated as she relies on a continuous act of impression management in order to create her online version of herself to conform to the demands of presence in the digital world. The instant fame she is given due to a meaningless tweet is a perfect example of how the digital identity can create a form of reel identity that becomes even more important than her actual, offline life. This brings about a continuous clash on authenticity and performance, which strengthens the instability of a coherent self.

This fragmentation is a direct echo of the concept of digital identity described by Sherry



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Turkle in her theory of digital identity in *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (1995), in which the concept of online identity is conceptualized as being multiple, fluid, and inherently unstable. Turkle claims that cyberspace is promoting people to live in polished and reconfiguring selves frequently, at the expense of a coherent one. This contradiction is centered in Lockwood and her protagonist, as her online identity ascent becomes dominant and the real one is getting lost and eroded. This struggle is made even more dramatic by the turning point of the illness of her niece, which challenges her to face the reality of embodied immediacy.

At this point the digital self becomes irrelevant and reveals the shortages of online identity in dealing with the actual human life. As the tension between virtual performance and lived reality is a major part of the identity fragmentation, the reading of the novel through the lens of Turkle is important, which is the key to interpreting the crisis of selfhood in modern internet culture.

Background of the Study

The idea of networked publics have been employed by Boyd (2014) in discussing the nature of the digital space as identity building, since the visibility and performance have since taken precedence, making such a forced display of self on the web, which means that the identity is tolerant and subject to impressions manipulation mechanisms, not authenticity. The failure of both the privative and practical environment also improves the performative self, wherein the internet contracting should and will always need to be negotiated (Boyd, 2014, pp. 38-40).

This study is being contextualized within this larger cultural and technological change and cogitates around the concept of digital identity as one of the critical problems of the twenty-first century. The relevance of the digital identity is informed by the process of cyber culture restructuring the everyday Relationship, emotions, experiences and self-perception. Online regimes encourage the users to appease romanticized schemes of the same, something that results into the creation of a gap between the digital enacted self and the offline experienced self. This is a stress that usually leads to alienation, anxiety, and disaggregated sense of self. It implies that the formation of a digital identity is a highly significant field of scholarly interest. This helps to retrospect to the current state of the degradation of unbroken identity into broken fragments to which one has to stick together in an ongoing attempt reconstruction. Bauman recognizes liquid modernity identities to be characterized by fragmentation where self is terror of being constantly ripped out by the agents of change and instability, which is, melting and dissolving like spots, as opposed to being one crust (Bauman, 2002, p. 83-84).

Lockwood's (2021) narrative is a depiction of the horrific emptiness of our more digital existence. It examines the effects of the internet culture that is highly displayed and well woven to create a perception people want. The text reveals the collision and contradiction between the online and off line identity, disintegrating the actual identity of an unnamed protagonist into fragments. The chosen text unites the two opposing worlds the digital and real worlds. The virtualized world of the protagonist does not match with her real miseries. The artificial beauty of the internet space is mingled with the real that is offline.

Literature Review

The notion of identity has developed to a large extent in this digital era that it has challenged the conventional philosophical norms of self. It has evolved from a linear and fixed identity to a fragmented, non-linear digital self which is the product of ever-changing digital world. The sense of fixed self has shifted to fluid self, constantly



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changing across time and space. The reel and the real have merged, making simulated experiences feel more impactful than real life events. Tripathi (2024) studies the impacts of digital simulations, which deeply effects consciousness, existence and the essence of being, especially on the context of digital immortality where virtual events and social media profiles dominates more than the real events. 16 His study centers around the philosophical and psychological dimensions of selfhood, the ever-changing nature if identity and fragmentation of self in modern digital era (Tripathi, 2024).

The real self turns into opaque when the individuals fabricate online personas which are selected and unreal. Digital culture affects identity and connection through a series of paintings made through collage, mixed media, and reflective surfaces. This constant pressure of impression management causes tension between vulnerability and performance and the validity of online connections. Dadabaeva (2024) reflects on the emotional exhaustion, curated personas, and the search for genuine interaction by provoking the users to clarify the margins between the real and virtual self (Dadabaeva, 2024).

Butler (1990) makes this argument stronger with the performativity concept by bringing out more the idea that identity is made with repetitive actions. These performative acts are done online are collective, archived, and automatically tested, which puts more stress on the imperative to sustain a curated persona. Playing with computers and virtual worlds, it is more convenient to consider oneself a complex and diffused, and not centralized.

With the growing reliance on digital communication and social media individuals frequently encounter a paradoxical situation of being hyper connected but emotional disconnection, depression and alienation from the real world experiences at the same time. Vaishnav (2025) speculates that online connections lead to the replacement of meaningful physical interactions leaving a deep scar on the psychological and societal well-being of the individuals. Social isolation and identity fragmentation are the products of techno-social displacement that utterly affects mental health, social relationships, and community cohesion eventually leading to existential crisis (Vaishnav, 2025).

Individuals consider themselves to be a variety of personalities distributed in various online spaces and not one unified self. Virtual worlds also provide spaces in which individuals interact and able to explore different sides to themselves. Turkle (1995) asserts that the utilization of digital media spent on digital media and its cyber spaces promotes the notion that one is plural and discontinuous instead of. fixed or unified. Development of a digital identity is a psychological and technical process, and can alter the ways in which people view themselves and the way in which they engage with each other. Virtual interactions can trigger new models of psychological well-being as they may even have a disintegrating and alienating effect (Turkle, 1995).

With the emergence of internet technology as an unavoidable phenomenon, theories were created by scholars in particular, dealing with virtual worlds. One of the first to make the argument was Turkle (1995) that digital platforms can encourage people to co-exist in many identities at once, usually with rival hedonistic needs. Her subsequent work (2011), notes that these several identities may cause exhaustion where people strive to be coherent across different digital situations (Turkle, 2011).

Digital identity is no longer just the issue of self-expression and is jointly created by both technology and social systems imposing their internal demands and requirements. As a sociologist, Castells (1996) takes on a writing approach describes the development of a network society where identity is constructed out of global flows of information. In this type of networks, individuals would be the nodes and their identities would be



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conflicted by platform infrastructures, metrics of visibility, and internet communities (Castells, 1996).

The irony of the contemporary digital connectivity is that the greater the connectivity the more it becomes ironic being able to access technologies at the same time brings about isolation and emotion fragmentation. Though the devices and social media offer constant connectivity, they tend to substitute humane relations with the superficiality of the interactions that grow weaker affectionate relationships and real self-cementation. One of the losses, Turkle (2011) mentions is the loss of loneliness due to the continuous guidance by digital devices that reduce the possibility of self thought and the process of coherent and synthesized self. Her ethnographic research with digital natives describes the super-positioning of digital spaces due to constant engagement in digital space leads to fractured identities with lapsed attention and lost intimacy. She has a critical take on the effect of technology in the disjointed digital self, the focus on the emotional and social cost of digital life (Turkle, 2011).

Digital revolution is not only altering knowledge and communication but also changing that too the ontological identity and belonging in the contemporary world. The authors argue that the demarcation among humans, between virtual world, technological reality, and the abundance of information as against scarcity all are becoming more and more blurred in the digital age. Levin and Mamlok (2021) describe digital society as a radical one modifying the identity forming process. The networked personality is a self that is this change has led to the creation, performance, and remodeling of web content online that is becoming more and more created, performed, and reshaped. Most notably, this recent state of ontology obliterates the 18 border between the real and the virtual selves, and promoting individualization and identity fragmentation (Levin and Mamlok, 2021).

Social media is the flourishing front stage where the users develop varied and specific digital personalities to fit into the virtual environment of the internet. This tends to create fragmentation in identity wherein an individual has to move constantly across various identities and roles that he or she presents online. To cope with impressions, replicated identities, as well as social approvals, the individuals tactfully toss between front stage and back stage behaviors. It is in this context that the present study delves to explore the gap between the real and the reel identity and its implications through the textual analysis of *No One is Talking About This*.

Objectives of the Study

To study the ways in which digital identity is performative, specifically through the centralization of appearance and the display of digital selves over lived reality

To examine the construction of digital identity in the world of portal, through such mechanisms as impression management, virality, and performativity

To explore identity fragmentation in connection with the tension between the mediated online identity and the actual embodied lives

Research Questions

How does Lockwood portray the concept of digital identity and constructed self by prioritizing appearance over reality?

To what extent does Lockwood manifest digital identity as a constructed and performative self in the online environment of the chosen text?

How does the novel represent the conflict between mediated online image and lived reality?



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Methodology and Theoretical Framework

Lockwood's narrative (2021) interrogates the crisis of identity in the world which is getting digital and the experience of self-fragmentation within contemporary cyber culture using Turkle's theoretical framework from her seminal work *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (1995). The research framework is based on the interpretive paradigm, which prioritizes subjective understanding, close textual analysis, and the contextualization of meaning within cultural phenomena. By focusing on thematic analysis, this study aims to uncover hidden and evident themes related to digital identity, simulation, and the fluid self as theorized by Turkle in her work (1995). Close textual analysis of selected text is the main methodological framework, with an emphasis on its unique fragmented style that resembles online discourse. This analysis focuses especially on narrative devices like abrupt transitions between digital and physical realities, meme culture references, and stream-of-consciousness narration. The study looks at how the experience of a fragmented digital consciousness is structurally reproduced by these formal components. Important scenes in which the protagonist balances her online and offline identities are examined for their sociological and psychological significance, paying particular attention to existential crisis or identity dissonance moments.

Turkle's framework gives the analytical perspective through which Lockwood has recreated the image of online digital identity, and mediated subjectivity is discussed. Various concepts organize the thinking exercise in the way that cyberspace is construct to comprehend online new spaces of identity experimentation and community building in the environments. Turkle presents identity as simulation a manner of exploring digital identity enactment, wrought, and even not necessarily attached to material reality. By applying Turkle's the study investigates insights into the 1990s internet culture in the current social media context that whether or not the book proves or counters her original thesis about the development of digital identities. The ethnographic observations about real behavior in the internet are made by Turkle, and the literary ones are made by Lockwood. The methodology compares portrayal of real vs. digital identity. This is specific especially under the methods of self-presentation and the psychological implications of the pervasive connectivity. Comparative method emphasizes the similarities in addition to the differences between fictional representations and real-life digital practices.

The crisis of the real lies in the core of Turkle's theory in which the perception of stable self is compromised by the impossibility in differentiating between lived and simulated experiences. Online personages often outshine offline vividness and emotional investment. The cyberspace evolves into a psychological reflection and an extension of an identity, location of positive self-construction by means of role playing, yet it exacerbates the loneliness and alienation to the real world as well since though it appears to have connections, it does not. It is encouraged when individuals are isolated in the virtual worlds. This was groundwork in understanding and was made possible by Turkle in her seminal study (1995) how online space promotes new self-exploration and identity exploration. Turkle maintains that online experiences make people explore seeing more than one so much at odds, personalities, and resulting in what she calls a poly, dispersed self. This multiplicity, which promisingly frees, also disrupts traditional points of view of a common and consistent self-image, increasing the threat of alienation and loneliness. The performative dimension of digital selfhood is explored by Turkle, argues that social media encourage users to have idealized versions of them. This performativity enhances the separation of the digital presentation and lived realities, usually causing anxiety and



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self-doubt. It also questions the tensions between authenticity and managerial customer control on the internet, whereby individuals are under continuous internet surveillance and are advised to be strategic identity performance may result in a fragmented and inauthentic atmosphere of the entire performance.

Analysis and Discussion

The question of identity has been a significant theme in literature over an extended period of time. This theme gains new significance in hyper-contemporary writing as people become more reliant on the internet for information, validation, and opinion formation due to the world's increasing digitization. In this context, identity is shaped by ongoing engagement with digital platforms rather than just personal experience or social interaction. By presenting the idea of digital identity formation, Turkle (1995) broadens the conventional understanding of identity and makes the case that people actively shape, perform, and negotiate their sense of self in a networked, mediated environment through online spaces.

The present study analyses the similar instances from the selected text where the protagonist's identity is shaped by one out of context viral post. *"She had become famous for a post that said simply, Can a dog be twins? That was it? Can a dog be twins? [...]"* (p. 13) This is a good representation of the concept of digital identity formation in that the identity of the protagonist is formed, exchanged, and recollected in a single viral moment instead of recurrent moral, intellectual, or personal traits. *"This is your contribution to society? A man asked holding up a print out of the Can a dog be twins? post."* (p.17). The society defined her in such a manner. The question diminishes the overall social value of the protagonist to an individual digital artefact as he is holding a print of the viral post. The physical copy of the printout is a symbol of the elusive online moment being made real and authoritative in the construction of which one is. What has been amplified and preserved by the internet has now become what she contributes and this is not based on her own values, intellectual activities or her involvement in any social activities.

Once an online identity is established through a random post, the character is unable to control how the image interpreted by the social media audience. Similarly, the character in the text loses this control of interpretation. *"Gradually it had become the place where we sounded like each other, through some erosion of wind or water on a self not nearly as firm as stone."* (p. 42). This extract has been viewed and analyzed in the study through the lenses of digital identity formation which brings out the small change of selfhood in digital spaces. The portal could initially have become a homogenizing environment since individuals can even express themselves, but with time it turns out to be a platform of individual expression. The language, tone and style of the collective are unconsciously adopted by the users and the performative homogeneity is established. This is seen as an indication of how digital spaces construct identity, in which self-expression is mediated and controlled by communal standards, algorithmic exposure, and the repetitive experience of going viral.

"There was still a real life to be lived; there were still real things to be done—above all, there was still good news, to be heard over a forkful of three-legged deer." (p. 42). This line foreshadows a conflict between the continuation of offline reality and the tidal wave of the online portal, so it is particularly fruitful to read against the background of the reel versus real identity. The recurrent emphasis of the fact, that there was still a real life to be lived, gives the impression that the real has not vanished but rather has referred to become actively recalled, even argued about. This suggests that the sense of self which



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the narrator has is no longer inherently linked with lived, embodied experience; on the contrary, as more and more, it becomes mediated by the logic of online performance, in which identity is performed, distributed, and approved by visibility. This confrontation is further augmented by the surreal image of the three-legged deer that demonstrates the intrusion of the logic of the online world into the offline perception. The reel identity, which was constructed by the meme culture and the viral absurdity, starts occupying the frameworks of how reality is being perceived.

The self is performative and continually negotiates the visibility, recognitions and social approval, as opposed to coherence. *"The people who lived in portal were often compared to those legendary experiments rat who kept hitting a button over and over to get a pellet. But at least the rats were getting a pellet, or a hope of a pellet, or the memory of a pellet. When we hit the button all we were getting was to be more of a rat."* (p. 51). Another extract of the formation of digital identity has been identified in the study. The example of behaviorist experiments is presented to show the obsessive use of digital devices and effects on identity formation. The analogy between portal visitors and test spaces predispose the behavior of a human being. On the other hand, digital users are not engaged in a meaningful way because of the tangible or symbolic rewards of their efforts, as is the case with the rats, thus forming a vicious circle of compulsive use that strengthens fragmentation and agency undermines.

The portal influences behavior and self-expression by external stimuli, who like, share, comment, etc., without introspection. *"The cursor blinked where her mind was. She put one true word after another and put the words in the portal. All at once they were not true, not as true as she could have made them. Where was the fiction? Distance, arrangement, emphasis, proportion? Did they only become untrue when they entered someone else's life and butted, trivial, up against its bigness?"* (p. 65). The extract demonstrates how willpower and bargaining of the digital identity takes place via online performance. The portal symbolizes the digital realm in which words that have been carefully selected and are personally valuable to the protagonist are reinvented upon the moment of sharing, which show the lack of correspondence between the intent and the response. Her inquisition into truth, fiction, and proportion echoes the performative quality of the online self, where identity is not merely performed but actively constructed and read by a networked audience. *"How she wished she had never read that article about octopus intelligence, because now every time she's last into a charge tentacle among the blameless new potatoes she thought to herself, I am eating mind, I am eating a mind, I am eating a fine grass of the subject at hand."* (p. 78). This extract reveals how the sense of self of the protagonist is slowly packaged by the data received via the digital platforms. She randomly read an internet article on the intelligence of octopuses and this affects her thought process of the Octopus. The recurring theme in her mind; that she is eating a mind, demonstrates the way digital knowledge redefines her identity. The things that she knows online also start to determine how she perceives herself offline. Regarding the digital identity formation, this is a scene that explains that identity is no longer formed through direct experience but rather through mediated knowledge in the digital space. The identity of the protagonist is conditioned by the things that the internet educates her to be concerned about. *"There began a period where she cried uncontrollably in cafés, taxis, grocery stores, bars; ... in the portal, where the entirety of human experience seemed to be represented, and never the shining difference of that face, those eyes, that hair"*. (p. 105)

Lockwood describes with great vividness the sense of fragmentation of self in the world of hyper-connected digital existence. The portal, a symbol of the virtual world, floods the



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protagonist with his emotions and is the experience of all human experiences assembled and shown wholesale. As long as she lives in this huge on-line space, she cannot fully feel the reality of her one on one, corporeal life, the sister or the close proximity of family and lovers. This contrast argues out the difference between the performative, mediated experiences of virtual world and the bodily experiences of the offline life which are authentic. Turkle (1995) states that cyberspace helps people to explore various identity, however, this multiplicity may cause the disintegration of consciousness, attention, and emotional presence. The main character of Lockwood has this duality: the main character is emotionally related to the idea of the collective online experience but is not integrated in the real world, the individual world. The text, therefore, dramatizes how hyper-connectivity is creating a self that is fragmented between digital performance and the real-life authenticity. The conflict between these worlds generates fragmented selfhood in such a way that genuine emotional life is not wholly conveyed, but the person still has to take part in both. The hyper-linked digital culture mediates, interprets, and finally fractures human experience leaving a people divided to perform and live in virtual reality. *"It was a marvel how cleanly and completely this lifted her out of the stream of regular life. She wanted to stop people on the street and say, "Do you know about this? You should know about this. No One Is Talking About This!"* (p. 79). Her virtual life is powered with irony, repetition, and lack of emotions, and offline life requires the physical presence, understanding, and sorrow. These doubled selves do not go together and make a break in her validity. The divided self, which has been conditioned to scroll instead of feel, finds it difficult to act in a truly personal way when he/she faces personal loss. This split reveals the impact of a divided self on emotional integrity and environmental instability of actual identity. *"There was still a real life to be lived; there were still real things to be done—above all, there was still good news, to be heard over a forkful of three-legged deer."* (p. 42). The passage gives a graphic description of the broken selfhood in the middle of the online virtual space and the physical material world. This recurring use of the word still implies the attempt to root the self in the tangible reality, as though the life in the real world now needs conscious one-step verification since it is being submerged in the digital world long enough. The surreal picture of a forkful of three-legged deer is an indication of the intrusion of internet logic into the perception of everyday reality. This kind of absurd imagery is as close to meme culture as meaning, which is broken, ironic, and not tied to a solid reality. Consequently, the interior life of the narrator functions in fragmentation, being influenced by the presence of the body and being conditioned by the digital imagination at the same time. This encounter discloses a split personality, a to and fro body which exists in both the real and unreal. The true-life reality provides the grounding of physical activities, but the mind is partially colonized by internet aesthetics so that it represents a fragment of consciousness that has difficulty in being complete in this real-life world.

It is a digital experience in which the narrative technique of Lockwood is reflected. It is narrated in short and disjointed lines that are reminiscent of scrolling a social media feed or a text messaging stream. Sometimes the sentences can be shortened to just one line, which is indicative of the attention spurt and splintered quality of the online world. The sudden change between serious issues and comical or ironic memes resembles the logic of social media algorithms, where newness, engagement, and viral presence receive much more preference than the logical integrity. This form of narration supports this process of constantly distracted, overwhelmed and fragmented mind of the protagonist. It transports the reader to the rhythm of paying attention online: quick, distracted, and stolen. By making this style decision, Lockwood successfully conveys the disunity of the



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modern self, as it is in the digital era identity is seldom a narrative; it can be better described as a collage and a scrapbook, a series of short-lived responses, trending material, and group commentary.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the tension between real and online selves in *No One Is Talking About This* (2021) Lockwood, emphasizing the aspect of identity fragmentation that arises in the hyper-digitized location of the portal. The analysis is based the identity theory of Turkle, from her book *Life on Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (1995), and it has illustrated that the story of Lockwood is not only a reaction to the anxieties but also a magnification of the initial fears regarding the instability of the self in the digital realm. The novel therefore serves as a modern-day literary version of the conceptual model of Turkle, as it shows how the proliferation of online spaces has intensified the crisis of identity in the twenty-first century.

The paper has attempted to explore the ways in which Lockwood exemplifies digital identity as a constructive and performative self specifically via the prioritization of appearance and online visibility over lived reality. The analysis suggests that identity in the novel is not a real manifestation of self but a well-managed act done out of the requirements of the digital culture. This corresponds to the argument that Turkle makes that cyberspace allows the creation of multiple, flowing identities that do not require a solid core. This way, the novel both signify and is a manifestation of digital fragmentation, thus letting the readers feel lost and disconnected in the world of the portal. This style emphasizes the manner in which digital culture transforms not only identity, but also the sense of perception and the shape of the narrative.

Notably, the current study fills a gap in the current literature by placing the work of Lockwood in context with Turkle first theoretical framework of digital identity. Though, a lot of criticism has been directed at the stylistic innovation and the way the novel plays with the language of internet, the research highlights some of the psychological and philosophical implications of the novel. Reimagining Turkle not in the digital age, but in the realm of the platform culture, it shows that some of the apprehensions surrounding digital identity not only remained unchanged but have only grown in strength.

For future researches, themes of digital identity and fragmented selfhood can be added to the human consciousness, relationship, and emotional experience beyond the scope of Lockwood's story in the digital age. Here and elsewhere in this collection of digital-age texts, the texts and themes of virtual performance, online monitoring/surveillance, cancel culture and the impact of algorithm on identity formation are comparable, and can be analyzed in comparison with other contemporary texts. The novel could also be read through the lens of new millennial ideas such as those of Byung-Chul Han regarding digital transparency, Shoshana Zuboff on surveillance capitalism or N. Katherine Hayles on postsocialism and the nature of the posthuman. These multidisciplinary projects might help to continue the research on how the notions of individual, authentic and human relationships are being dismantled in the 21st century as part of digital culture.

To sum up, the novel by Lockwood is an eloquent comment on the hyper-digitized world, and its effect on human identity presenting the clash between the real and digital self, which shows the ways online culture disintegrates and reinvents the self. Digital space not only allows developing new modes of expression and connection, but also, questions the integrity and genuineness of identity. This paper draws attention to the timelessness of initial digital theory as well as to the necessity to keep paying critical attention to the transformative dynamics of identity in the digital era.



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